DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 223 712 TM 820 859

AUTHOR Lowman, Rodney L.
TITLE Uses of "Parallel Processes" in Evaluation Research.
PUB DATE 26 Aug 82
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (Washington, DC, August, 1982).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Evaluation Methods; *Evaluators; *Experimenter Characteristics; Federal Legislation; *Government Employees; Organizational Change; *Researchers; Research Methodology
IDENTIFIERS Evaluation Research; Federal Agencies; *Institute for Social Research MI; *Parallel Processes

ABSTRACT

Frequently, the behavior of researchers reflects important and otherwise unrecognized aspects of the phenomenon which is being studied or evaluated. In other words, the "processes" of the researcher are "parallel" to the "processes" of the entity being studied. These parallel processes are illustrated with examples from an evaluation of five Federal organizations and the effects of a major personnel policy reform on them. The behavior of the researchers, a group from the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, was frequently parallel to the behavior of the agency staff being studied. (BW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED223712

Uses of "Parallel Processes" in Evaluation Research*

Rodney L. Lowman

Institute for Social Research

The University of Michigan

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

As a clinical psychologist who also studies organizations, I have often noted similarities in the tensions experienced by persons in psychotherapy as they attempt to understand their personal conflicts and the equally complex processes that accompany efforts to create change in organizational contexts. As an organizational psychologist who also treats disturbed individuals, I have observed how both individual and social-systemic dysfunctions embrace similar perceptual distortions.

The phenomenon of "parallel processes" in evaluation research is not dissimilar to issues experienced in individual and social-systemic approaches to change. In each instance, the equidistant but in many ways similar tracks represent common themes. "Transference," the systematic replication in treatment of conflicts external to the change relationship, whether in psychotherapy or in organizational change, is parallel process. In the heady 1960's, "you are what you eat" was more than the trendy sloganeering of health addicts. A researcher's (evaluation or otherwise) parallel theme song might well be "you are what you study", or, more to our point here, "what you study is what you are," at least temporarily.

Logico-deductive models of science to the contrary notwithstanding, the science of evaluation is pluaralistic and subjective. While our personal psychological dynamics, particularly in an era of social science shortages on the

---

*Paper presented at the American Psychological Association annual convention, Washington, D.C., August 26, 1982.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. L. Lowman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

supply side, may not determine what we study, how we go about what we research is a metaphor of ourselves. More importantly in today's context, our own behavior as researchers may often reflect important and otherwise unrecognized aspects of the phenomenon (in this case, the complex social system) which we seek to research, or, more judgmentally, to evaluate.

In the artistic realm, beauty and truth intermingle in the splendid illustration of parallel processes provided by John Fowles' (1969) book, The French Lieutenant's Woman, a clever juxtaposition of Victorian and contemporary realities. The movie of the same name even more directly brought such processes to an elegant, if less subtle and somewhat less successful representation. Similarly, one would not expect to learn much about the philosophy of science from a discourse on removing a stuck screw on a motorcycle panel yet Robert Pirsig (1974) teaches us otherwise in his important work Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. Closer to home, but in our neighbor's home so we can more easily examine it, "parallel processes" were well illustrated by the actions three years ago of an APA Division a few numbers away from this one. So alien was the prospect of a symposium on parallel processes that the presentation was accepted only on condition that the program committee could also send a critic, to my knowledge an unparalleled (!) event that could in no way have more succinctly summarized that Division's primary orientation to affect, people, and the so-called less rational aspects of life.

Metaphors aside for a moment, the idea for my presentation proceeded not primarily from prior conceptual biases, of which I'll own many, but from a slowly emerging recognition of what was happening to our research group as we undertook the process of evaluating five Federal organizations and the effects on them of a major personnel policy reform. I offer our experiences, or more accurately, my perceptions of them, as a backdrop for evaluation researchers.

I submit that such phenomena are relatively common, easily ignored, and more than just window dressing, since they provide important clues for more traditional research methodologies.

I will use as an example of the value of parallel processes an ongoing (we think) study of the effects of the aforementioned reform of the Federal sector. Let's start before the beginning. Why did we choose to evaluate the organizational effects of this legislation in the first place? Euphemistically, but truthfully, we wanted to learn more about the behavior of public service organizations. More relevant here, however, we needed the bucks. As we are based in a self-supporting research institute, we are not immune to being the tail that wags someone else's dog, though bidding for a specific RFP contract research piece of work was not then common at ISR. We undertook this project for the same reason the changes we were evaluating were implemented by most of the Government agencies with which we worked: circumstances more than choice forced it upon us. An initial parallel hypothesis emerged: federal bureaucratic organizations often sleep in someone else's bed. While they may on occasion choose the color of the sheets, it is not always possible for them to decide when to change them, and certainly not, as we shall see, what the check-out time will be.

This hypothesis had subtle implications. ISR, where our research was centered, has had a long history of studying important organizational changes in the private sector, such as the Quality of Worklife movement. Such studies, usually well and reliably funded, typcially generated an enthusiasm that seemed lacking in the present project. It was not that anyone intentionally was doing a bad job on this study, or uninterested in it, but rather that the excitement which good research so often embodies was for the most part missing from our group as it examined effects of such innovations as merit pay plans and performance

appraisal systems which we may not have thought were ideally conceived in the first place. Similarly in our research sites (return of parallel process) we would not say that the persons we encountered were uninvested in their jobs, but that the tasks they, their organizations, and agencies had to do were often unchosen and therefore seemingly of less interest than they might otherwise have been.

Back to ISR and our front yard, we enountered compromises to our desired scientific methods from the start. In the process of site selection, for example, our carefully formulated criteria were quickly compromised by political realities. In general, the more autocratic the agency, the less researcher-established criteria determined site selection. Nor was our host (funding) agency of much help in modifying the choices of the agencies who were unmindful of the research needs. "Science" took a back seat to agency hierarchies, just as implicit power relationships appeared to dominate inter-agency contacts. The power of approval, even in an issue like this of comparative insignificance to the agencies, was not to be surrendered lightly.

Our entrapment in inter-agency networks was another parallel. This research would have proceeded more smoothly if we had had only five organizations to manage. However, the diffuseness of the agency context required unusually complex efforts on the part of the researchers. Each agency's own elaborate infrastructure had to be managed and kept informed of our activities, as well as one or more union inter-organizational networks, in addition to our sometimes-harried multi-level relationships with the funding agency. While such complexity may be unusual for academic researchers who typically only need to placate a single government agency at most, our experience paralleled the day-to-day realities of Federal bureaucratic organizations. Moreover, political influence was inescapably entwined. It was in no sense five distinct organizations whose needs we had to

consider, but closer to fifty. In our project, as in the Government itself, the surpise perhaps is not that things are not always done in an outstanding manner, but that anything gets done at all.

Having chosen or having had chosen for us five research sites, we still had to organize ourselves to get the work done. Afer considering and rejecting creative alternatives, such as rotating site responsibility, we opted for a specialist model which we were to discover was similar to the government's preferred operational style. One senior researcher would oversee each site's activities, assisted by a graduate student. On retrospective reflection, the ultimate site pairings were curious: the most politically oriented team members ended up being assigned to what turned out to be the most political agency, the most social services oriented, the medical center site, etc. Does such self-selection also take place on the part of Federal workers as they end up in specific agencies and jobs? A study of our data using Holland's theory of occupational personality types (Lowman & Schurman, 1982) suggested that this did indeed happen, at least on average.

Our working realities were strained from the start. Despite the initial funding for the study being about three months late in final approval, we were required to design instruments and collect a year's worth of data within the remaining nine months. Although our deadlines were occasionally and with considerable effort extended, we began to relate to time in a strange way. Deadlines were constantly regressed by the funding agency so that preliminary reports were requested months in advance of final deadlines. "Reports on the report" became routine, and frequent questions were raised about our specific plan for meeting the contractual requirements. These concerns never implied inadequacy of our work, but rather, the ever-shifting internal political realities faced

by the agency. Our constant frustration as a research team of not knowing whether what was expected of us today would also be relevant tomorrow faithfully mirrored the constant fluctuation and dissension faced by government employees. The usual academic stances were non-functional. Our contractors were probably not sensitive to our constant frustration, and suppressed sense of helpless anger because this was their own day-to-day reality: why should we be treated differently.

The internal dynamics of our team relationships also deviated from norms. I must first state that ISR is a highly inter-disciplinary organization in which scholars from quite diverse backgrounds working together on projects is the norm. Our research group for this project was unusual in its initial composition only in having a disproportionately high number of females (much like the Government) compared to the sex ratio of the pool from which applicants for the lower level positions were selected. Somehow this team never became a very cohesive group. For one thing, we never learned how to function very effectively on common tasks. Initially, we worked mainly as site teams, and than as subject matter specialists on specific aspects of the study. Our identification was with our sites or specific research topics and few could, or were willing to, see how the various pieces fit together. Although our final products were usually of acceptable quality on individual topics, integration seemed less well done, and then mainly by the most senior of the staff. Were these experiences dissimilar from the funding agency's organization into "subject matter experts", its reviewing merit pay plans in relative isolation from the performance appraisal systems on which they were based, or the establishment of an internally separate, and therefore politically vulnerable, office to evaluate the Act we were studying?

Our first two end-of-year reports were painfully produced products. The team of relationships had been strained by the close deadlines, unusually high (quantitative) work expectations, particularly for graduate student employees who were also full time students, and a less-than-total enthusiasm for the subject matter. The senior research staff resorted more frequently to control mechanisms than it preferred to or had historically done. In a group strongly commited to participative managerial styles, it took two years before inter-member conflicts could begin to be directly confronted. After doing so briefly, we abandoned the effort in the interests of meeting pressing dealines.

Dedication to producing a high quality product was sometimes compromised by the perception that our intended audience was unappreciative, that our hard work was unnoticed, and that no one much cared about the results of the study in any case. Only when we were seen by the focal organizations as a potential vehicle for expressing their concerns about the Act we were studying was there much interest, and then confined to a relative few. Our periods of intense efforts were alternated with times of relative inactivity, so physically and intellectually exhausted were we from the prior effort. Scientific products (publications) from the study were few in number not because our sponsors opposed them, but because their constant demands and changes left no time for such work. It is not unusual in ISR projects to subordinate personal research interests to the needs of the sponsor, but to be so completely unmindful of the scientific goals of the researchers as often occured with this study required a sustenance of effort that few scientists could long endure. Is the Federal sector different in this regard for its own employees? Are bureaucratic governmental organizations able to accomodate individual needs divergent from their primary and often-fluctuating purposes? Are not alternating role overload and

"burnout" frequent causes of so-called lazy bureaucrats? Can such a system consistently obtain the best from its members?

Still another parallel of our own behavior and that of the group we were studying was its approach to fiscal issues. Ours was to be a well-funded study extending over five years. We approached our project funding somewhat as Congressmen approve budgets: with rather little regard to the realities of fiscal constraints, or as Sarason (1972) has described, with the "myth of unlimited resources". When, toward the end of the project's third funding year, we discovered that we were fast moving to potential fiscal difficulties, the majority of the research staff reacted with shock and surprise. Perhaps this reflected what had evolved as a primary motivation for many of the participants: if intellectual stimulation and publications had to be suppressed, at least there was good funding. About the same time that we were struggling with our own fiscal concerns, we were also hearing both through the media and through our personal contacts with the funding agency, distressing stories of reductions-in-force (RIF's) and the practical decimation of the agency through forced days off and drastic cuts in its workforce, many of which involved key actors for this study. Our own reaction to financial plight and the threat of losing funding for the research altogether was as dysfunctional but as predictable as that of the people in Washington who were being RIFed. Our anger was translated at home into confrontations and threats, and only after considerable strain and tension, ventilated in many painful meetings, were we able to reconstitute ourselves, somewhat the worse for wear, to get the work done. What had been moderately low levels of enthusiasm plummeted further. Threats of working to (minimal) standard were made, probably like the concerns expressed by our agency counterparts. While such actions were mostly not carried out because of internalized standards of high quality and pride in our work, the

costs were high. The previous sense of unappreciation became strong resentment, and the conclusion drawn that other sources of esteem would have to fill in for the lack of appreciation we felt from our primary funding source.

Embedded in this series of developments was a larger and increasingly paralyzing uncertainty about the future of the project. What had been advertised as a five year study, to be renewed each year on delivery of an acceptable research product, became less and less likely to survive. The fact that one of the three university contractors had already been dropped, and not apparently for producing poor quality work, was a distant but nagging concern. The change of political administrations meant that all bets were off, both for us and for the funding agency. By the third year, we were assured that the project would not continue in its originally intended form, but the exact nature of the cutbacks and/or revisions was uncertain. What followed was a curious game we played with our sponsors. We were given just enough hope to believe that there was a potential contingency between what we did and being refunded not to give up. At the beginning of the third year of funding, it was suddenly decided by the funding agency that it was important to please its internal subject matter specialists. Accordingly, a long list of research questions was presented to us by the funding agency which we were to address in the next year's report. Most of these were rather naively framed questions which, though interesting, had little relationship to the data already collected. They were mostly laypersons' formulations of research agendas which were too general to be answerable with available data.

Our own research group was divided as to how we should address these questions. One faction felt that we should try to respond to the questions as best we could in the interests of keeping the agency happy; the other advocated ignoring the questions because most were not part of the original contract, were

unanswerable with the data collection instruments long-since designed (and with the extended review of the funding agency), and were likely to have little real impact on the funding agency in any case. I do not mean in this or anything else said today to suggest incompetence or malfeasance on the part of our sponsoring agency. Far from it, our representatives were sincerely interested in keeping this study alive, and were coping the best they could in the management of a changed political environment. We shared their struggles. Our own behavior, including the internal dissensions, mirrored the sponsor's reality.

The cost for us, and I suspect for the agency, of not knowing our future, was considerable. Many team members hedged bets by seeking other work, with the consequence that their energies were divided among more than one project. Others made plans to leave the project permanently. Still others waited it out, hoping that in the end the funding would be renewed and the work could continue. Seligman's (1975) model of learned helplessness accurately portrayed the situation and the responses it engendered. Many learned that in the face of an irrational environment and unpredictable future it is best not to get too excited about threats of radical change. Keeping going, maintaining personal and intellectual sanity, demanded that we proceed as if there were to be a tomorrow for the study, even though many of us had doubts.

It has often been suggested that the Federal workforce is a large immobile mass, highly resistant to change. When I served in the Air Force, a military trainer described the civilian workforce as being like the handsome missle that stood in front of the Strategic Air Command's headquarters building in Nebraska: you can't fire it and you can't make it work. Our own creeping resistances to work were not motivated by ineptitude, disinterest, limited brain power, or lack of motivation. We moved to (for us) relative passivity--

though I hasten to add that we worked like dogs throughout this project--for reasons I suspect similar to those experienced by Federal workers: the contingency between survival and doing well, much less reward, became weaker and weaker. Our work group was far from ordinary, but the nagging suspicion remains that our best products from this study will follow rather than accompany our direct involvement with the Government. Similarly, the cynicism we so often encountered about the law we studied was not indicative of laziness or viciousness: it was adaptiveness, an all-too-often appropriate defense. Perhaps the ultimate irony and parallel was that by the third year of the project we had learned to work together rather well and to get the jobs done much more quickly and somewhat less painfully. This occured just in time for the project's gradual or swift (we still do not know which), but certainly premature, demise.

There are many other examples that could be cited to illustrate parallel processes. These include: generation of vast amounts of paperwork, both internally and to our sponsoring agency: 1022* pages of official reports alone and a bank of file cabinets housing our internal documents; the gradual emergence of attempts to keep expectations as vague as possible so we could later impose our own realities on them; decreasing concern for as thorough feedback to our research sites as we might ordinarily do; and the development of a "wait-it-out" strategy on the premise that many of our problem contacts in Washington probably wouldn't be around for very long.

In the movie Z, as powerful a representation of the effects on integrity of a despotic political system as you will ever see, the drama ends with a postscript recounting the ultimate disposition of the heroes and villains. The heroes were mostly jailed, removed from power, or deceased, while the villains regained their positions of influence. The success of Z, as that of any political thriller, rested on a clear distinction between the good and the bad

*First two years' reports, excluding a 5 1/2" thick set of tables, reproduced back-to-back.

guys. In the Federal sector, we are left with more ambiguous realities. The ultimate demise of our project would not be all bad. The immediate realities have been painful, and the search for alternate funding with so little notice has created special difficulties. The uncertainty of not knowing until the very last the future of the study is perhaps the most stressful problem of all. Yet, most of us seem to know at some level that our academic values were being compromised or postponed in important ways. As witness, only one formal publication has yet appeared in print from our massive data collection efforts. Similarly, the goal of reducing the size of the Federal Government is not a development that many in Government would regard as all bad. Furthermore, many of us have had doubts all along about the likelihood of success of the reforms we were investigating. Still, the manner of handling the probable ending or serious retrenchment of the project left staff members feeling anxious, frustrated, disillusioned, and cynical about Government and its preferred methods of functioning. Such reactions were also rather common at the research sites we visited.

These parallels are presented not as a comprehensive listing, but as illustrations of the phenomena we have encountered. I do not suggest that introspection of self-observation are substitutes for traditional research methodologies. We have learned much about the Government and its workers by questionnaires and interviews. I suspect, however, that some of the most important conclusions we will draw about life in the Federal sector will not come from our surveys and painstakingly constructed interview protocols. Parallel processes enable the generation of hypotheses at a level of clinical richness that a priori instrumentation cannot provide. More usual research strategies can then be built upon these hypotheses to attempt to learn about the findings in more reliable ways. It is thus not for making definitive statements about

the examined social system that parallel process are best suited. As Robert Pirsig put it in a different context:

> ...classic understanding should not be overlaj with romantic prettiness: classic and romantic understanding should be united at a basic level...At present we're snowed under with an irrational expansion of blind data-gathering in the sciences because there's no rational format for any understanding of scientific creativity...We have artists with no scientific knowledge and scientists with no artistic knowledge and both with no spiritual sense of gravity at all, and the result is not just bad, it is ghastly. (1974, Pp. 293-294)

It was one of Freud's seminal contributions to recognize that a separate psychology was not needed for the patient and the therapist: both can be explained by similar concepts and principles. Researchers do not act in isolation from what they research. Ignoring such phenomena as parallel processes is as easy as ignoring the unconscious. Recognizing their existence and making use of them for the betterment of our understanding of the systems we study is the task to which I invite your attention and energies.

List of References

Fowles, J. The French lieutenant's woman. Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1969.

Lowman, R. L. & Schurman, S. J. Psychometric characteristics of a Vocational Preference Inventory short form. Educational and Psychological Measurement, 1982, 42, 601-613.

Pirsig, R. M. Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance. New York: William Morrow, 1974.

Sarason, S. B. The creation of settings and the future societies. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1972.

Seligman, M. E. P. Helplessness. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1975.